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ABSTRACT

Although many educators consider the teaching of the research paper in high schools old-fashioned, this aspect of the English curriculum remains important for helping students master inquiry and reasoning skills. If carefully presented, the research paper develops skills indispensable for today's complex, information-based society. A review of the current research suggests a number of elements which tend to lead to creative and thoughtful student papers. First, teachers must allow students the freedom to select their own topics. Second, the paper must have an argumentative edge featuring a thoughtful thesis, so that it is not a mere regurgitation of facts. Students must learn how to find a problem, develop an arguable thesis, discover researched support, and finally organize, analyze, and apply the material. Third, a successful research paper is a sequence of assignments allowing the teacher to intervene in one or more stages of the process. Students need sufficient time to think about and develop their arguments. Fourth, a teacher must foster a community of student researchers. Fifth, students should be shown how to generate valid questions regarding their topics. In short, research papers are valid written assignments when students are challenged to create something new with the uncovered knowledge. Students should be led through an escalating series of research experiments, pushing them to higher analytical skill levels with every exposure. (Nineteen references are attached.) (HB)

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THE RESEARCH PAPER: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

by
Kimberley Moore

I feel like the Kellogg cereal eater who has to admit in the dark shadows she eats Frosted Flakes: I admit, I consume research papers! My fondest memories from high school include an in-depth research paper I entitled "The Bat Book." I remember loving hours of researching critical essays to prove Joe Christmas from Faulkner's Light in August was the Christ symbol. When I researched caribou conservation in my college freshman English Composition Class, I was so involved in the project my teacher called me, "Caribou Kim."

Then I switched my role from student to teacher. I wanted my students to seize the research paper with the same fervor I felt as I became an expert on a topic. I sensed that my love for the research paper, however, was old fashioned, old hat, and at best, strictly traditional. It has been called an albatross, a rite of passage, a hassle. Students and teachers alike hate it. It can be worse than two hours of calculus problems and 50 biology pages put together. Because of its unpopularity, the responsibility for teaching the research paper is shuffled from English to science to history. English departments pride themselves on removing the dinosaur from their curriculum, and school boards force the outmoded reptile on other departments.

Teachers everywhere are throwing it out, removing it from their curriculum as a "pale caricature of what it was supposed to be and, at worst, a kind of exquisite torture for student and teacher alike" (Dellinger, 1989, p. 31). Although the research paper is a possible activity for the Sophomore Writing curriculum in my school district, the majority of English teachers have stopped requiring it or are searching for alternatives. But wait, I said. Why all the hatred? Why all the bombast on why the research paper should be an extinct species?

As I clung to the research paper, I fought to find validity for my passion. Could the research paper find a niche in our process-oriented, make-it-relevant to the student, educational system? After joining Thoughtful Communities: The Douglas County Higher Literacy Project, I put myself through the rigorous research process once again. While I searched for and

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studied articles and books that had chapters on the research paper, I observed my two Sophomore Writing classes as I guided them through the research process leading to a finished research paper.

I discovered data that stated "the most common college-level writing assignments that students encounter across the curriculum require them to incorporate facts and concepts from other texts into their own prose" (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p. 1). The same report revealed that "the research paper is taught nationwide in 84% of the college freshman composition programs" (p. 1). Knowing that many of my high school students are college bound, how could I as an English teacher ignore such data? I am convinced that the student researching becomes a candidate for the dictum of "A Nation at Risk" which states: "we must become a learning society rather than a learned society." Economist Baldwin Ranson states:

> Advance of human understanding is now recognized to depend on mastery of skills in scientific and technological research and development. Such mastery does not call for filling students with the results of past scientific and technological inquires. Rather, it requires for modern literacy that students master modern tools of inquiry (1987, P. 2).

The research paper helps students to master inquiry by seeing themselves as "active, able, problem solvers" (Kantz, 1989, p. 18).

An essential part of a student's education is the research paper. If badly taught, it can become drudgery, but if carefully presented, the research paper teaches skills indispensable for our complex, information-based society. In the articles I read and as I reflected on my experiences with my students while they explored their research topic, I discovered recurring elements that led to creative, thoughtful research papers. If teachers incorporate these components, the research paper becomes not a rote machine to be avoided, but a tool to be used in the struggle toward the highest level of critical thinking.

Student Topic Choice

The number one element I found in all successful research projects was student topic choice. In Ken Macrorie's description of his project the "I-

Search," he encourages teachers to allow students to pick their own topics. Students must ask, "What's choosing me? What do I need to know?" (Macrorie, 1980, p. 71).

If a teacher expects students to engage in the research project and take a high investment path, the teacher must enable the students' total ownership by allowing them to choose their own topic. Personal topic choice may be difficult for the science or history student who is required to write a research paper covering Physiology or American History since 1945, but through teacher-prepared activities, the student can arrive at a topic he'll be willing to make a part of his soul.

Before the actual researching begins, students should do a topic search. For example, if the class is studying history since 1945, teachers can ask questions: what don't you understand about this era? What events make you angry? Do you see wrong choices in the politics of the era? Who are the victims of the era? What part of the era is relevant to you? A teacher should spend at least a class period searching topic options, first individually so students will not be influenced by other students' choices, and then as a group to facilitate the start of a researching community.

The student's own meaningful topic choice is essential. Nelson and Hayes discovered in their research that "regular exposure to writing situations that require high-investment responses...lead to the internalization of high-investment goals and strategies" (1988, p. 19). As my student who chose "The Homeless" for her topic said, "I am glad that we were able to pick a topic that we were interested in. That made it easier to do."

The Thesis

The number one complaint about the research paper is that it is a regurgitation of facts, little more than "cut and paste." This is a valid concern and one that must be addressed. A research paper that has an argumentative edge and a thoughtful thesis, however, provides the component necessary to overcome a pastiche.

Many teachers have found solutions through other types of research projects. Macrorie's I-Search directs the student out of books and the library and into the real world. The final I-Search paper is a story of the student's search on a subject written in a personal voice from a personal point of view. Tom Romano's multigenre research paper encourages the

student's creativity through "informal, personal, and unpressured prose with students seeking to recover information, to make connections, and to generate thinking" (1990, p. 126). The final paper can be written in different genres such as narratives, poetry or drama. How do these projects transfer, however, when a student is forced to synthesize textual information found in the library in a formal paper? Kantz found in her research that typical students "have trouble with assignments that require them to write original persuasive papers based on textual sources" (1989, p. 2). As the student searches to validate his argument, the thesis forces the student researcher to engage in library research.

The Center for the Study of Writing states, "students in content-area courses are routinely asked to write expository and persuasive papers dealing with large bodies of information, to select, arrange, and reflect on the materials, and to marshall proofs that are considered appropriate within a specific discipline" (Kantz, 1989, P. 1). The report goes on to say that "when content-area teachers give writing assignments, they expect students to organize, analyze, and apply the materials as well as to regurgitate it accurately. It seems appropriate, therefore, to ask students to practice these skills in their lower-level writing classes" (Kantz, 1989, p. 1).

If students are to "practice these skills," teachers must approach the teaching head-on. Regurgitation of facts occurs when the student has not learned the skill of developing a problem to be solved. The student must learn how to develop an arguable thesis and discover researched support as well as his own intuitive support. A strong thesis statement guides students away from "cut and paste." A student of mine picked Thalidimide as her research topic. We worried she would fall into the pit of reporting on the tragic cases of the Thalidimide babies. Emilie saved herself by giving her topic an argumentative edge: "We must thoroughly research new drugs so the Thalidimide tragedy will not be repeated." Emilie's research was used to develop a for-or-against strategy as proof for her original argument. Her thesis was a focused angle, stance or problem that forced her to "take stands, make decisions and risk opinions" (Hashimoto, 1991, p. 124).

According to Hashimoto, the students' thesis should be blunt and assertive; "their ideas should sit out there naked and vulnerable." The more naked and vulnerable they are, the harder they will have to work to

protect them, support them, and otherwise keep them from sounding foolish, incomplete, or wrongheaded. (1991, p.126). Students of successful inquiry-based research papers describe their purpose as "to make a case; to argue for a position; to find a provocative or new approach" (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p. 3).

Typical students have trouble with assignments that require them to write original persuasive papers based on textual sources (Kantz, 1989, p. 2). If students are not taught how to find a specific thesis to guide their research, they will probably "set out on a fact finding mission" (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p. 3) and their final product is in danger of being a boring treatise of facts. We do not need to read any more research reports listing John F. Kennedy's accomplishments to prove that "he was a great president." Emilie's thesis, however, led her to this passionate conclusion:

> Tragedy. Any time the Thalidomide generation is brought up in conversations, the word "tragedy" can be heard over and over. Such a tragedy can be prevented again if medical researchers pay attention to what they are doing, and never forget the awful curse cast on all the poor victims of Thalidomide. Although no one can change the terrifying events of the past, we can work to prevent them from happening again in the future.

The more practice students receive on a thesis-driven approach, the more likely they will be to fulfill their mission to write original, information-based expository and persuasive papers for their various content-area classes rather than just spit facts at the teacher. A research process that is thesis-driven and requires multiple sources provides a forum for this necessary practice.

Teacher Involvement in a Process Approach

A successful research paper is a sequence of assignments instead of a one shot paper with a single due date. To begin, teachers must teach many basic researching skills: topic selection and focus, source evaluation, notetaking, and documentation, to name a few. Next, students who choose the high investment path for their researching are influenced by high teacher involvement. Nelson and Hayes describe successful student

researchers as having teachers who "intervened in one or more stages of the process, providing advice, guidelines, or requirements that affected how students completed the assignment" (Nelson & Hayes, 1988, p. 11). The effective teacher becomes an "interested collaborator and facilitator" (Nelson & Hayes, p. 19). When this happens, students discover "a new found involvement and control in exploring their own ideas and seeing them grow" (Applebee, 1984, p. 171).

Time is another important element of the process. Students need time to think, mull and develop ideas (Reid, 1991). They need time for active researching to visit different libraries, explore other resources away from libraries, conduct surveys, and interview experts on their topics. My student researching the homeless volunteered her time in a soup kitchen. Time allows the topic to get under each student's skin so the researching process can unfold naturally. Time provides what teachers desire: the student's high-investment engagement.

Time also allows the involved teacher to incorporate the writing process into the researching. Hayes and Nelson discovered student success was generated through the process approach. In their research they found the teacher based her students' grades not only on the final product, but also on the exploratory writing and drafts produced (1988, p. 11).

Linda K. Benson does a masterful job of plucking the albatross by "applying what she knows about the writing process to the writing of research" ("Another Look," 1987, p. 49). She provides time for freewriting sessions, response groups, and plenty of rewrites before the production of final drafts. Incorporating Benson's ideas, I had my students do freewrites without their notes after library researching sessions. Because freewriting leads to ownership, I found a high level of engagement and passion in their final products that resulted in the best writing my students did all semester. I also required the same revising process that students use on a five paragraph essay to this in-depth paper. They completed working drafts before their rough drafts were edited: one student called it "Ye ole rough draft"!

Teachers agree that writing crystallizes students' thinking; therefore, the more exploratory writing students can produce during the process, the clearer the thinking. In addition to their enhanced knowledge and rhetorical base generated by their researching, my students produce a

clear-thinking scholarship in their research papers not seen in their other written assignments.

Community of Researchers

There has been a lot of research about the importance of a community of writers to create successful writers, and the same holds true for students involved in research. A teacher needs to create a community of student researchers. Students need an audience that includes their peers as well as their teacher throughout their research process. Students need the opportunity to bombard each other with questions and arguments. This discourse serves as another kind of freewrite. By verbalizing their newly acquired knowledge, students' ideas start crystallizing and becoming their own rather than belonging to some unknown author.

In addition, the community needs to expand beyond the library and the classroom. Parents, friends, extended family, and business people in the community can all become resources and sounding boards for the student researcher's ideas. Nelson and Hayes record an increase in students' engagement as students become eager to discuss their topics and progress with others. A community of student researchers provides a component necessary to take this dinosaur off the endangered list.

Reflective Thinking/Rhetorical Questioning

Questioning is another important component for a successful researching process, but students are often too anxious to find quick answers. As Kantz states the problem, "Students may not know how to think about the material in ways that allow them to say anything original or persuasive" (1989, p. 2). Emilie may have simply reported on different case studies if she had not asked, "Why was Thalidimide not researched better?" The impetus for students' curiosity, according to Katz, lies in teaching students to read sources rhetorically. Students need to identify conflicts, discrepancies, and confusions in the sources as they develop their own questions about their topic. A favorite topic for my students is the Ku Klux Klan, but they often fall into the trap of reporting on the history of the Klan.

To keep from getting caught in that trap, Kathy Coffey provides a question-generating activity called "Playing the Accordian" after students have picked and focused their topics but before research has begun. The students write the topic at the top of a blank piece of paper. The paper is

passed around for other students to ask one or two questions about the topic at the bottom of the sheet. After folding up their questions, they pass the sheet. At the end of the activity, the student researcher has a list of unique, honest questions to form the basis of thoughtful, rhetorical research. These questions, combined with the student's own questions, force the student to look at old assumptions with new questions as he researches to defend his thesis (Coffey, 1989, p. 45).

For example, my student Ryan, whose topic was the KKK, received peer questions that included: "When did the KKK begin? How popular is the Klan today? What kind of violence does the Klan engage in? Can the Klan be outlawed? How does the Klan promote racism?" Several of these questions triggered Ryan into his focused search on racism and the KKK. Ryan got beyond the "Klan Report" by asking, "What is the Klan's relationship to racism today?" His bold thesis stated that "The KKK is wrong and has to be stopped or racism will never go away." These questions helped Ryan decide what notes to take from the avalanche of sources he encountered and also lead him to the most important purpose of researching: original thinking.

So What?

Why do teachers and students need the research paper? Why can we not just teach our students the researching skill? These kinds of questions negate the purpose of research. We research not just to become knowledgeable on a subject but to create something new with that knowledge. Most original ideas are generated from prior knowledge; our students need to connect with that knowledge and utilize it for opinion, argument, and creation. What good is researching solar energy if we don't eventually refine the solar-powered car? The research paper is the end product. It correlates and synthesizes all that knowledge into hopefully, something original. Thomas Jefferson created "The Declaration of Independence" by synthesizing the ideas of John Locke. Our students must learn the same skill.

As the research paper dies on the educational vine, I sense the tree dying with it. Granted, research can be taught in many different ways, but when taught with the above components, the research paper fulfills all the criteria necessary for our "learning society." Educators must engage students in higher literacy to compete in today's world. "If educators...{treat} literacy as mastery of the best extant tools of inquiry,

we...will then...produce a whole nation capable of operating at the frontiers of knowledge" (Ranson, 1987, p.28).

Therefore, how can we as educators let this inquiry process become extinct or a mutation? The research paper should be regenerated throughout a student's entire education. Students must be led through an escalating series of research experiences (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988, p. 258) with each experience increasing range and quality. The research paper pushes students to higher analytical levels with each exposure. The value of the research paper is stated succinctly by Schwegler and Shamoon: the research paper gets "students to think in the same critical, analytical, inquiring mode as instructors do - like a literary critic, a sociologist, an art historian, or a chemist" (1982, p. 820-1). The student producing a research paper is higher literacy in action.

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